Untapped Resources: Women and Municipal Government in Nova Scotia

Highlights Report

Women in Local Government Project

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Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

YWCA

NOVA SCOTIA

Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations

Steering committee members:

Mayor Anna Allen, Town of Windsor, Chair
Deborah Campbell, Assistant Municipal Clerk, Cape Breton Regional Municipality
Deputy Mayor Claire Detheridge, Cape Breton Regional Municipality
Elizabeth Haggart, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations
Barbara Hart, Board Member, Halifax YWCA
Councillor Kathy Langille, County of Cumberland
Deputy Mayor Sherri Lewis, Town of Digby
Councillor Patricia Nickerson, District of Shelburne
Doreen Paris, Member, Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women
Councillor Dawn Sloane, Halifax Regional Municipality, Vice-Chair

The Steering Committee acknowledges the working group whose energy brought the project to life. They are: Lyle Goldberg, Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities; Barb Hart, YWCA; Elizabeth Haggart, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations; Denise Moore, Advisory Council on the Status of Women; Kristel vom Scheidt, graduate student, Saint Mary's University; and Nicole Watkins Campbell, Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

The report was researched and written by Elizabeth Haggart and Kristel vom Scheidt, with special thanks to Debra Bellefontaine, consultant, who facilitated the six focus group sessions. Margaret Issenman designed our brochures, report cover and this highlights document.

Sincere thanks also go to the many Nova Scotia women who shared their thoughts, stories and experience in the focus groups.

For further information on this project please contact UNSM Policy Analyst Lyle Goldberg in Halifax at 423-8673 or via e-mail at goldberg@eastlink.ca.

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Foreword

In Nova Scotia, women are under-represented in municipal government. Women make up more than 50 per cent of Nova Scotia's population yet under 22 per cent of municipal councillors (the third-lowest in Canada), 7 per cent of wardens and mayors and only 14.5 per cent of chief administrators (the lowest in Canada).

Municipal governments make decisions that affect people's daily lives. Without the input of women in all their diversity – as politicians, board members, staff and citizens – municipal leaders have too little information about how their decisions affect the people they serve.

Women are actively engaged in their communities. They are interested in participating in municipal decision-making, however, for a variety of reasons, they are not involved.

Why is it important that more women become involved in municipal government? Increasing women's participation will help ensure that municipal governments reflect the populations they serve. It will increase the range of people who make decisions and who have input into decision-making. It will promote democracy by ensuring women's perspectives are counted. In short, it will make municipal government more relevant to its citizens. It will also increase the talent pool available to municipalities.

I would like to thank the members of our steering committee and working group for all of their efforts in putting this document together. I would also like to thank our partners – the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the Halifax YWCA for their support for the project. Special thanks also goes to Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations for their generous financial contribution and staff support. Finally, I thank the women who shared their experiences and insights in the focus group sessions.

It has been exciting to be involved in this timely project. Now the challenge begins with discussion of the report's findings and implementation of the recommendations.

I look forward to working with the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities and our other partners in moving this project forward.

Mayor Anna Allen
Chair, Women in Local Government Committee

It's been 85 years since the first woman in Nova Scotia was elected to a municipal council, and still too few women participate in municipal or local decision-making.

Only one municipal councillor in five and one in three members of municipal boards and commissions is a woman, despite the fact that women make up just over half the population of the province. And we need to know more about women's participation as voters and in public consultations; we don't track those numbers.

If decisions made by municipal governments are to be representative of and responsive to the needs of both women and men, both women and men must take part in and give input to those decisions, which often affect their daily lives. When women are not consulted, when they are not at the table, municipal governments make decisions without the complete picture of how their decisions affect citizens' lives.

Why are women not getting involved in decision-making in municipal government, the level of government closest to the people? And how can we, as a society, address this loss of talent and democratic deficit? This project seeks to answer these questions.

Women Councillors by Province and Territory

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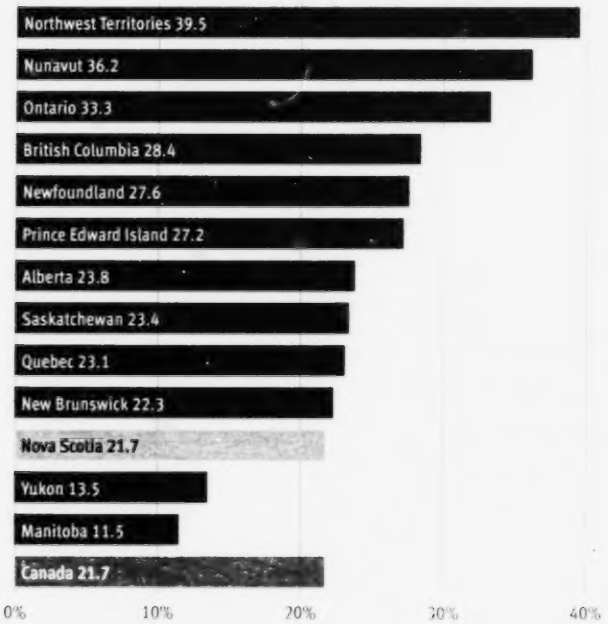


Source: FCM 2004

Project Overview

At its 2004 annual general meeting, the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities resolved to research how to remove barriers that hinder women's involvement in local government decision-making.

UNSM staff worked with the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the YWCA of Halifax to develop the Women in Local Government project. Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations provided substantial funding.

The project's goals were to

- identify the opportunities to better involve women as citizens and as politicians in municipal government;
- recommend measures to involve women in all their diversity in consultation and engagement activities of municipal government; and
- recommend measures for recruiting and retaining women in municipal electoral politics.

The research had three components: a review of existing studies and initiatives concerned with women's engagement in politics and municipal government, a survey of Nova Scotia's 55 municipalities, and six focus groups that addressed women's experiences and perspectives on participation in municipal government decision-making.

The existing studies and initiatives came from Canada and around the world, including the 2004 Federation of Canadian Municipalities study and a supporting study conducted by the YWCA in the Halifax Regional Municipality. Since most of those studies focused on women's participation as candidates and elected officials, and most at the provincial or national level, this project aimed to fill a gap by gathering data that was specific to Nova Scotia at the municipal level.

What was learned in the research review was supported by information gathered through six focus groups held in communities across the province. The researchers heard about women's experiences as voters, municipal staff, members of municipal boards and committees and councillors. We also heard from women who contribute through community organizations instead of through their municipal government.

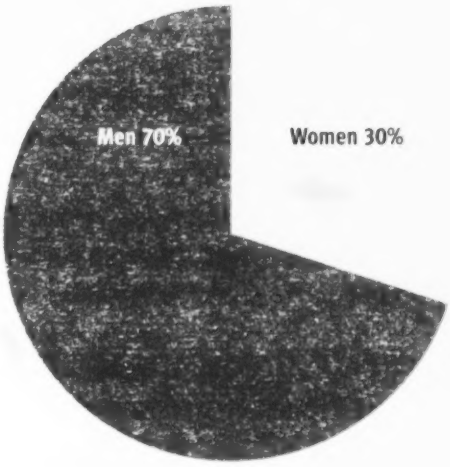
Nearly 70 per cent of Nova Scotia municipalities responded to the survey. The results give a fairly detailed picture of where and how women are currently participating in municipal decision-making.

Research Findings

Numbers tell a part of this story. From half the population of the province comes one fifth of municipal councillors. Moreover, only 14.5 per cent of municipal chief administrators and 29 per cent of management staff are women. Among administrative staff, women tend to be clustered in clerical positions where they wield little influence.

Women make up less than one third of members of boards and commissions. They make up one quarter of board and commission chairpersons, and about one third of citizen representatives on all boards and commissions. Women tend to be clustered on recreation and heritage boards, and not on boards that make decisions about finance, land-use planning and public safety, issues with differing implications for women and for men.

Women and Men on Municipal Boards and Committees



Source: NSIs Project Survey, 2005

Data about how many women vote in municipal elections is collected, but not made available. Few municipalities (and other orders of government) document gender or cultural information on participants in community consultations. Demographic information on voters is collected in the United States, giving politicians there very clear ideas about who votes and what they care about.

There are several main reasons why women don't participate fully in municipal government decision-making.

- **Awareness of municipal government**: most of us, women and men, don't recognize the importance of municipal government in our day-to-day lives.

- **Appreciation of the importance of having different perspectives** in decision-making. The more like-minded a group is, the less likely they are to make decisions that consider the needs of people unlike them. Women's experiences and socialization are different from those of men, just as the experiences of African Nova Scotian women differ from those of Mi'kmaq or white women and

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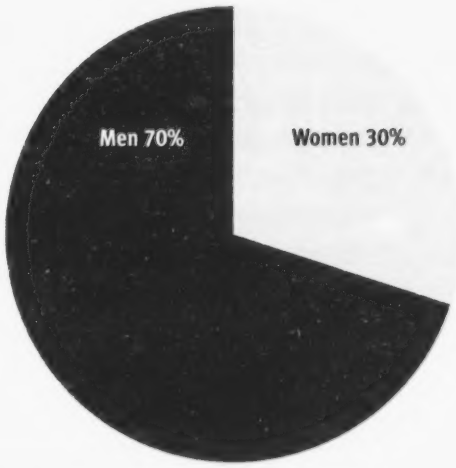

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wealthy women's experiences differ from those of poor women. We need to see ourselves reflected in an institution before we can believe that it is relevant to us. For these reasons, women – in all their diversity – must have input.

- **Women need to earn an income** to support themselves and their families. Those with paid employment find that hours of work or workload can conflict with council work. Councillors who attended the focus groups had retired before running, were self-employed or had other sources of income. This appeared to be less of a problem in the largest municipality, where they are paid for full-time work.

- **Women are busy.** Focus group participants echoed research from Statistics Canada showing that women still perform most of the caring and household management in addition to paid employment and voluntary work.

- **Women often don't have equal access to household assets** such as vehicles and the Internet, and they are more likely than men to be poor.

Although women are busy and may lack resources, they do get involved in community, church and other volunteer organizations. So why not municipal government?

- Many women have given up on municipal government as a way of making change. The United Nations Beijing conference on women and decision-making determined that a critical mass of about 30 per cent is needed before governments are responsive to women. This is a wake-up call to governments to not only include women, but to diligently seek out their input and listen to them.

- Elected women commented that personal, institutional and public expectations regarding their responsibilities as elected officials sometimes conflicted and competed with personal, spousal and society's expectations of their care giving and household management responsibilities. Institutional constraints often made this even more difficult, for example, when meetings were scheduled for times when women were busy making dinner for and supervising the homework of their children.

- Campaign financing was also reported as a factor affecting women's ability to compete for elected office. Many of the elected women noted that with no ceiling on campaign spending, those with sources of financing have the advantage.

- In the focus groups, women noted that female candidates with prior political experience and connections to political parties appeared to have an advantage over those without the contacts and experience in running a political campaign.

- Many of the women in the focus groups commented that women politicians' personal lives seem to come under much greater scrutiny by the media and the public. Media coverage of Belinda Stronach's cross-over to the federal Liberal Party focused much more on her personal life than on her reasons for the decision. Elected women in Nova Scotia also had their own stories of media and public scrutiny.

- Social expectations regarding "appropriate" behaviour for women appears to be a catch-22 in the political arena. Many women councillors noted that it can take years for them to have credibility and be accepted by their male counterparts. Several described not being accepted until they became "one of the boys," suggesting that they had to conform to the behaviour and culture of the male-dominated council. At the same time, women often get criticized for doing this. Many women who attended the Women in Local Government focus group sessions, including municipal politicians, expressed a dislike for the aggressive behaviour and disrespectful language that sometimes occurs at Council meetings.

- There was also discussion around the adversarial nature of politics, with its winner-take all, simple-majority rules for decision-making. Women may prefer to work toward consensus.

When you consider all these factors, it's not surprising many women feel they can accomplish a lot more working in community-based organizations with other women and without the pressure and difficulties of the political arena. But communities still need women's perspectives, and women want to contribute.

What brings in women to municipal government?

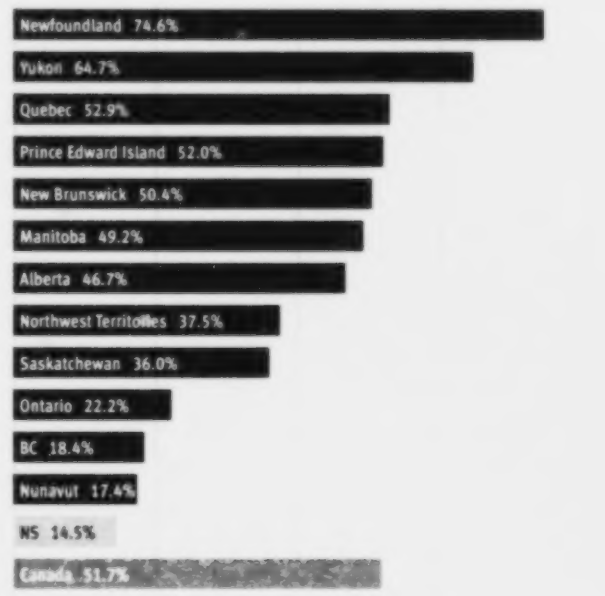
Just like men, women need to be asked to run. Elected women in the focus groups told us that having support was key. Prior political experience helped. They liked knowing they were making a difference in their communities: they found it gratifying to have an immediate impact that they could see. Finally, they felt they didn't have to toe a party line, and they liked the relative freedom to make decisions based on what they believed to be best for their constituents, not what their party dictated.

When government wants to hear from the business community, it goes to the business community. If they want to hear from half the population, **governments must go to women.** Municipalities in other Canadian provinces have benefited from doing just that.

We also need more women in municipal administration. It's as important to have women in senior positions in administration as in elected office. And in Nova Scotia, we need more women to head municipal administrations and to hold senior positions.

While women in senior positions indicated they have **access to professional development opportunities** through Dalhousie University, women in clerical positions commented that they were often frustrated in their attempts to gain access. They noted that their superiors were reluctant to grant them worktime and financial support to participate in courses and workshops, saying that the office could not function without their presence.

Women Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) by Province and Territory



Source: FCM 2004

We also need to pay more attention to difference. The FCM report and feedback from the Women in Local Government focus group participants indicate that there is a major need for "more training and awareness-raising activities for municipal staff and elected officials in the areas of racism, gender and anti-oppression work."

It's time for change, and everyone has a role to play in working to increase women's participation in municipal decision-making. The UNSM, the AMA, individual municipalities, individual councillors, community organizations, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, community organizations and citizens can work together and as individuals to make a difference.

Without women, we're missing out on talent, and women are missing out on an opportunity to have their voices heard.

By implementing a number of the committee's recommendations, we will start to see an increase over time in the numbers of women participating in municipal government – as elected officials, as staff and as citizens.

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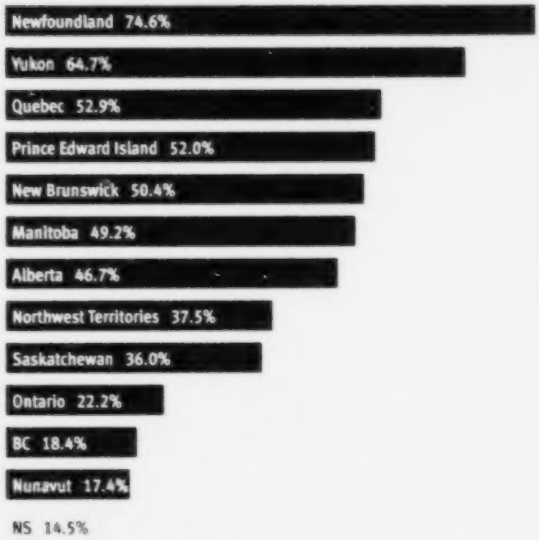

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Recommendations for UNSM

1. That the UNSM develop and implement a communications plan for a public awareness campaign to educate Nova Scotians on the impact, role and importance of municipal government in people's day-to-day lives. This plan should include:

    a. Specific efforts to reach out to diverse women and women's organizations, as well as organizations that work with youth, African Nova Scotians, persons with disabilities, First Nations people, immigrants, etc.

    b. A component that highlights municipal government as a viable and worthwhile career option for women (Suggestions from the Women in Local Government focus groups included participation in high school, college and university career fairs, providing cooperative education placements for college and university students; participating in job-shadowing programs for youth and adults; providing work placements for adults in job-retraining and career development programs; and scholarships for students interested in municipal government as a career opportunity.)

    c. A package of support and informational materials that can be made available to municipal government and individuals to assist them in contributing to the public awareness campaign.

2. That the UNSM work with stakeholders to provide workshops on diversity, gender analysis and affirmative action at UNSM conferences.

3. That the UNSM request that the Association of Municipal Administrators (AMA) arrange for municipal administrators to receive training in why and how to apply a gender lens in the development of their policies and processes, beginning with a workshop at an AMA conference.

4. That the UNSM work with women's equality-seeking organizations, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and municipal leaders across Nova Scotia to develop and implement an action plan for encouraging women to run for elected office. The action plan should include:

    a. Accessible information sessions on the role and responsibilities of municipal councillors and municipal government held well in advance of the deadline to file candidate's papers

b. Accessible, non-partisan campaign schools for women (such as the one held by the Status of Women in November 2004) specific to running for municipal office, well in advance of municipal election periods

c. Presentations by women councillors and mayors to diverse women's organizations on what it is like to run for and hold elected office at the municipal government level

d. Encouraging municipal leaders and citizens to approach and support individual women to run for office

Women on Municipal Boards in Nova Scotia

Source: WILG Survey 2005

e. Messaging that highlights the positive aspects of holding elected office and the ability to make a difference in the community.

5. That the UNSM work with stakeholder organizations to strengthen the supports for elected councillors, by:

a. providing more substantial orientation programs for new councillors that address a broader range of topics and include diversity training and training on how and why to use a gender lens as part of policy development and decision-making

b. developing a mentoring program for new women councillors

c. holding informal networking events for women councillors on a regional and provincial basis.

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6. That the UNSM, in conjunction with the AMA, investigate the feasibility of having a mechanism independent of individual municipal governments that staff can turn to for support in the event of workplace conflicts, wrongful behaviour, sexual harassment, etc.

7. That the UNSM Board request that the Government of Nova Scotia collect, tabulate and disseminate publicly voter turnout in municipal elections by age and gender and, if necessary, amend legislation to allow this to happen.